

**Candidate Forum:
Responses to BOE Candidate Questions**

1. *How will you empower educators to develop flexible environments that recognize that learning happens in different places, at different times, and in different ways, inside and outside of school? (2-minute response)*

Primary among the responsibilities of a school board is to set district goals and develop a sustainable budget. Therefore, I would work with my BOE colleagues to set goals around professional development and to include funds for field trips as a way to empower educators to develop creative learning environments.

Professional development opportunities that are meaningful and appropriate can provide educators with new ideas, creative classroom approaches, and unique problem-solving techniques. PD allows educators to collaborate with their peers and advance their professional practice. That, in turn, can lead to teachers developing creative learning environments and/or discovering learning opportunities outside the four walls of the school. (For context, this year's budget earmarked \$57,770 for PD, or 0.001% of the total school budget.)

This leads me to field trips. As vital as time in the classroom is, wonderful learning can happen in other places, be they museums, theaters, factories, municipal buildings, or local businesses.

One last point I'd like to make involves school-home partnership. Schools could regularly disseminate to families ideas for local museums, outings, and events. While it is entirely up to individual families to decide how to spend their free time, schools can play a role in providing the information. The responsibility of the BOE would be to support those efforts through policy and budget.

2. *What do you think the schools are doing right to prepare students for a successful future? Likewise, what do you think could be improved upon and how would you make that happen? (3-minute response)*

The Bethel Public Schools recognize the importance of educating the whole child, which includes addressing their social-emotional needs. In fact, one of the three BOE goals last year was to enhance our schools' SRBI systems. SRBI, or Scientific Research-Based Interventions, are educational and behavioral support services matched to student need and based on data.

BHS offers two amazing programs—Pathways and NJROTC—that give students the opportunity to explore potential career paths and, harkening back to the first question, offer students unique learning opportunities outside the traditional classroom.

Our schools' robust arts and music curricula are a point of pride.

Bethel's 1:1 technology for our students grades 2-12 is necessary, as are tight guidelines around use of technology. I am so glad that the BOE implemented these policies and updates them necessary, as they recently did with their cyberbullying policy. I will do my part to continue that important work to keep all students safe online.

As a member of Bethel's BOE, I will ensure that the schools continue to be funded properly, so that we continue to attract and retain top-notch educators and staff.

Recently, the high school added Arabic to its World Language offerings. This is a fantastic development for our students. I would like to see an even more expanded World Language curriculum that offers classes for our youngest learners. Early language learning yields tremendous benefits, including increased cognitive abilities across all subjects.

It is the responsibility of board members to support and advocate for any initiative or change the board collectively decides to implement, and I will absolutely do that.

3. What do you think are the most important ways we can keep our kids safe in school? How do you balance keeping kids safe with making sure that they are not afraid? (3 minute response)

A safe environment for all students is paramount. Without it, learning simply cannot take place. (In Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, only basic physiological needs like food, water, clothing, and shelter are more of a priority than safety.) There are three ways to think about a safe learning environment:

- **It is inclusive and celebrates difference and diversity of all kinds;**
- **It provides a clean and safe physical plant inside and outside the buildings;**
- **It protects all members of the school community from violence.**

Some of the measures taken to ensure these three different levels of safety need to be transparent to students and families. For example, they need to know exactly how and why BPS promotes an inclusive learning environment and that students who malign others will be disciplined. They need to see that the schools’ interiors and exteriors are physically safe and clean. They need to see that exterior doors remain locked during the school day and that all of the schools are monitored by security guards and/or SROs.

However, and this pertains to my third point—protecting members of the school community from violence—not all layers of security should be visible or widely discussed. I, a member of the public, do not know all of the security measures currently in place. I do know that police in general have the ability to access cameras during emergencies and when crimes have been committed. If this is not currently happening in our district, I would hope that a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the BOE and the Bethel Police Department could be developed to allow the police to have camera access. I believe that our schools should employ the strongest safety protocols available without infringing on the learning environment.

To ensure that kids are not afraid, families must play a significant role in helping them understand that drills are for preparedness only. It is up to adults to keep kids safe. Kids don’t need to know exactly what’s being planned for and what preparations are being undertaken. However, every contingency should be planned for and rehearsed, but that doesn’t have to involve students in every way and time.

I know that BPS has made safety an issue of utmost important, and I am aware that Dr. Carver, the BOE, and the Bethel Police Department have an excellent working relationship.

4. How will you ensure schools cultivate engaged and informed citizens, ready to work together across difference and actively participate in our democracy? (2-minute response)

Civics has never been a more crucial subject. It can and should be taught at all grade levels. Active participation is a key component of US civics. I would like to see our schools design ways for students to become decision makers in the building, whether it's helping to determine the school menu or voting on what books a class should read or deciding which activities to learn in PE classes. If students are allowed to have a voice in their schools and see that they are being taken seriously, it may encourage them to remain active community participants as they grow older.

Schools can also encourage community engagement with annual field trips to our Municipal Center, where they can meet town leaders, hear from our Registrars of Voters, and learn about the New England Town Hall form of government.

Another way to engage our student citizens is to incorporate debates into the curriculum. At their best, debates teach students how to listen to a different point of view and how to disagree civilly with each other. These skills are critical to positive civic engagement.

5. If you were to send a newsletter to every Bethel household, around what three issues would you focus your update? (30-second response)

This question is puzzling to me. First, it would be entirely inappropriate for an individual Board of Education member to send out a newsletter. Second, our Superintendent already sends out an excellent and comprehensive weekly update to the community.

What I could envision for the Board of Education as a whole is to regularly encourage voters to participate in the annual budget referendum process. Not only would this demonstrate civic participation on behalf of our voters (and thus excellent modelling by school parents), it would provide voters with necessary information regarding educational budgetary needs.

6. What are your qualifications for running for the Board of Education? (30-second response)

I have been a BPS parent since 2004 when my son started in Circle of Friends. He is on the autism spectrum, so I have been integrally involved with our schools' Special Education services since the beginning of his schooling until present day, where he is receiving Transition Services. My other child is a high school junior who has been a student-athlete and honors student. I myself have worked in the field of education my entire adult life, the last twelve years of which I have been a high school teacher. So as both a BPS parent and educator, I am deeply invested in our town's schools. I am also a longtime community volunteer. Recently I served on the School Start Time Committee, and I am a member of DARA (Danbury Area Refugee Assistance). I'm a parent, an educator, and a volunteer, but what I am most of all is grateful. This district has given my children so much. I have a tremendous sense of gratitude, and now is the time for me to repay all of the benefits my family has received from BPS by applying my education, experience, and conviction to its Board of Education.

7. Numerous rankings are published each year comparing our schools against others in the region and state. There are a number of factors that go into these rankings. What would you prioritize in order to improve our rankings? (1-minute response)

The CT State Department of Education places the greatest emphasis on standardized Math and Reading scores; therefore, to comply with their methodology, I would make academics our priority.

The ranking system used by Niche.com has teachers as their second most important factor. We need to make sure we are continuing to compensate our educators competitively to attract and retain top-tier staff.

US News and World Report values college readiness, meaning the number of students who take and pass AP exams. Our academics must remain rigorous.

Having looked at these and other ranking organizations, none of them considers the social/emotional health of students. Yet, students are unable to learn productively or at all if their more fundamental needs are not being met. (See my reference to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, question 3.) I would like to see a metric that holds schools accountable for our students' mental health.

8. *What role, if any, do you think students should have in the political process? (1-minute response)*

The Bethel school district would be shirking its duties if it did not teach civics, the importance of voting, and how to become an active participant in our democratic society. Election years provide an ideal opportunity for students to learn about local, state, and national candidates and the offices or positions for which they are running. Equally important for students is to learn about topics pertaining to free and fair elections: gerrymandering, vote counting, election monitoring, and ID laws.

Once students are educated, they can decide for themselves what role, if any, they would like to have in the political process. Their involvement can also start at the school level by running for student government.

9. *Looking forward, what do you think are the biggest issues on the horizon over the next 5 to 10 years and what would you do to address them? (2-minute response)*

First, I would like to tackle the issue of unfunded mandates. According to the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, Connecticut legislators have passed more than 380 unfunded education mandates. These mandates are costly and, at times, burdensome to districts. I would like to work with our congressional delegation to reduce this stress on our educators and taxpayers.

Second, I would like our district to rethink the high school-to-college paradigm that is our societal norm. It is imperative for schools to present other viable options than costly 4-year undergraduate programs. Our state has a dearth of skilled blue-collar labor. In fact, this is a countrywide problem. Forbes Magazine ran a December, 2018 article titled, "In 2019, Blue-Collar Workers Disappearing and In Hot Demand." Not only should our district educate our students about various professional pathways, we should look at where we can reshape our curriculum to make sure we are giving our learners the foundational skills and knowledge they will need in their futures.

10. *With increasing school enrollments, what additional measures beyond current practices would you implement to validate residency requirements? (1-minute response)*

According to a very recent conversation I had with Dr. Carver, this is “absolutely not a problem” for Bethel. The system we have in place works, the proof of which is that there have been only six families who have withdrawn because of residency discrepancies since 2017. I would not add any further checks to a system that already works well.

11. *As more families move into our great town we are facing two significant challenges: 1) larger class sizes 2) increased expenses for support services needed for our growing ESL and special needs populations. Supporting this growth adequately (including hiring the needed teachers & support staff) can only be accomplished with an increased budget. Will you support this need this spring when budget season comes along? (2minute response)*

Bethel has seen what happens when we do not fund our schools adequately. NEASC had our schools in probationary status in the late 1990s, when I first moved to town. Over the years, with a focused Board of Education and with community support, funding for our schools has increased, and we have the results to show for it, although Bethel is still below our DRG’s average per pupil spending (\$15,545 vs. \$15,736 DRG average).

As a member of Bethel’s Board of Education, I pledge to take an active role in shaping an appropriate school budget that meets the needs of all of our learners.

12. *Recent research has suggested that later school start times may change student achievement outcomes. This topic is currently being investigated in our own school district. One BHS Civics student asks, “What is your opinion of school start times?” (1-minute response)*

It is not that research has “suggested” that later start times “may” have a positive effect on adolescent students; it shows unequivocally that it DOES lead to positive outcomes on any number of metrics, including test scores, truancy, discipline,

physical health, mental health, and young driver accident rates. Ignoring this data would be unconscionable. As a member of the School Start Time Committee, I worked among a large group of stakeholders to come up with scheduling options that included later start times for our middle and high schools. On the committee, we parsed the research, examined what other districts in our state have done, weighed various scheduling options, and applied questionnaire data gathered from families, teachers, and students to our schedule options. I am proud of the work of the School Start Time Committee, and I am confident that a later start time will lead to very positive outcomes for Bethel's students.